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The Zero Option

By Stansfield Turner

HONOLULU — President Reagan's announced "zero option" objective in the arms talks with the Soviet Union in Geneva would, if realized, benefit the West, but it also would carry serious risks.

To comply in the negotiations on reducing theater weapons in Europe, which began Monday, the Russians would have to dismantle three types of already deployed ballistic missiles — the SS-20, the SS-5, and the SS-4 — perhaps 600 in all. In exchange, the United States would cancel plans to deploy 572 new medium-range missiles in Europe — Pershing 2's and cruise missiles.

One benefit would be to relieve our European allies of their fright caused by the build-up of nuclear weapons threatening their territories. But this is a short-term benefit because the Europeans will soon realize that it is largely illusory. Europe could also be hit by Soviet intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, shorter-range missiles based in Eastern Europe, and bombers.

A more significant benefit from the successful reduction in tactical nuclear arsenals would be the impetus that it might provide to seek a more comprehensive agreement to control *all* nuclear weapons.

But successful negotiation of the Reagan dismantling-and-cancellation proposal — that is, the "zero option" — would confer important advantages upon the Soviet Union.

America would be giving up a significant geographic advantage. Soviet theater nuclear weapons pose no physical threat to the United States, yet any American ballistic missile in Europe threatens not just Soviet forces on a battlefield on the Continent but also the heart of the Soviet Union's strategic forces: the large, land-based missiles pointed at the United States. If agreement is not reached on the zero option, the Russians' strategic force will be vulnerable and ours will not. Consequently, they badly want to negotiate away our geographic advantage.

Another problem is that the zero option would eliminate the United States' land-based cruise missiles in Europe at a time when our dependence on such missiles is increasing.

In SALT II, we resisted Moscow's efforts to limit cruise missiles because we were — and still are — well ahead in this technology, and because the cruise missile fits well into the land, sea, and air legs of our strategic nuclear triad. This fit becomes more important as our confidence in the triad's ability to survive an attack erodes.

President Reagan's recent decision to deploy only half as many B-1 bombers and land-based MX missiles as originally planned reflects an understanding that large, land-based missiles and manned bombers that can penetrate Soviet airspace (except perhaps for the so-called Stealth bomber in a decade or so) have had their day.

While we still believe that the Soviet Union cannot find and hit our strategic-missile submarines, we cannot risk relying on any single leg of the triad.

Consequently, the most significant part of Mr. Reagan's decision was to put cruise missiles into regular submarines. This signaled not an increased reliance on submarines but a turning to the cruise missile to bolster the sagging triad.

Cruise missiles can also be placed on land launchers in Europe, as currently planned, or on aircraft, on ships, and on the soil of the 50 states.

An agreement that eliminates land-based launchers in Europe forecloses only one cruise-missile option, but unless we are careful it could also dangerously narrow our freedom to use this best substitute for the two dying elements of the triad.

Therefore, we had better understand the benefits to be gained now and where we will hold the line on further restrictions on cruise missiles.

We must also ensure that the zero option does not rule out nonnuclear cruise missiles, because we need them more than the Soviet Union does.

Our military power is built around the use of tactical aircraft. Soviet superiority in tanks and artillery has always been somewhat offset by our greater accuracy in bombing. But advances in Soviet weaponry are making such use of aircraft very risky. Again, the best substitute is the cruise missile.

The principal missile the Russians would forsake, the SS-20, is small and mobile — it is about the size of a fire department's hook-and-ladder truck. Photographic verification techniques cannot ensure that it is not being hidden in barns or caves. Thus, it is reasonable to demand on-site inspection, which, in any event, would be essential to progress on all sorts of future arms-control agreements.

Finally, for verification purposes we must hold out for an all-or-nothing elimination of the SS-20's, SS-5's, and SS-4's. So long as retention of some of these missiles is authorized, we cannot confidently know exactly how many are deployed. But the chance of uncovering a surreptitious deployment goes up markedly when none is authorized. Then, the spotting of even one is evidence of a violation.

In sum, President Reagan's proposal has merit but also risk. For it to work, we must hold to it and press our advantage no matter how loudly the Soviet Union screams or our allies urge compromise. Anything less would not compensate for the longer-term disadvantages to this vital area of our national security.

Adm. Stansfield Turner, retired, was Director of Central Intelligence from March 1977 to last January.

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